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FOREIGN NATIONALS CHARGED WITH ATTEMPTING TO PROVIDE MATERIAL SUPPORT TO TERRORISTS AND ALIEN SMUGGLING

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Ten foreign nationals have been indicted by a federal grand jury in Miami on charges of attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization and alien smuggling, Assistant Attorney General Alice S. Fisher of the Criminal Division, U.S. Attorney R. Alexander Acosta of the Southern District of Florida and Julie L. Myers, Assistant Secretary for U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced today.

Palestinian native Jalal Saadat Moheisen, and Colombians Victor Daniel Salamanca, Bernardo Valdes Londoño, Carmen Maria Ponton Caro, José Tito Libio Ulloa Melo, Jorge de los Reyes Bautista Martinez, Nicholas Ricardo Tapasco Romero, and Edizon Ramirez Gamboa were arrested by Colombian authorities on Jan. 26, 2006, in Bogotá, Colombia. Two other defendants – Luis Alfredo Daza Morales and Julio Cesar Lopez – remain at large. The arrests were the result of a coordinated investigation into alleged document fraud and human smuggling. The probe was conducted by U.S. and Colombian federal prosecutors and investigators from ICE and the Colombian Department of Administrative Security.

The defendants were charged in a 17-count indictment returned by a federal grand jury in the Southern District of Florida on Jan. 3, 2006. The indictment, unsealed yesterday, charges the defendants with conspiracy to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization, conspiracy to commit alien smuggling, bringing unauthorized aliens to the United States for commercial advantage or private financial gain, and encouraging or inducing aliens to come to the United States.

According to the indictment, during the course of an undercover operation, the defendants allegedly arranged and facilitated travel from Colombia to the United States for individuals they believed to be members of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, or FARC, a designated foreign terrorist organization. The defendants allegedly provided fraudulent Colombian and Spanish identity documents, including Spanish passports, which allow individuals to enter the United States without a visa. The defendants allegedly purchased airline tickets to the United States for the individuals and arranged their undetected passage through immigration controls at the international airports in Bogotá, Colombia and Panama City, Panama. The defendants charged over \$20,000 for their services.

The indictment contains no allegations of connections to any other foreign terrorist organizations.

The indictment also alleges that the defendants offered to assist individuals they believed to be FARC members in buying and selling illegal drugs, and that they offered to sell weapons and paramilitary supplies, including 700 AK-74 rifles, 50 50-caliber guns and two helicopters.

The United States intends to seek the extradition of the defendants from Colombia. The defendants face sentences of up to 15 years in prison and fines of up to \$250,000.

“Entry into the United States is a privilege that cannot be bought and sold,” said Assistant Attorney General Fisher. “With a callous disregard for the law and the security of this country, the defendants allegedly sought to smuggle members of a dangerous terrorist organization into this country. Working side-by-side with our law enforcement partners and countries like Colombia and Panama, we will ensure that such alien smuggling rings are detected and dismantled before any damage is caused.”

“These criminals sought to profit at the expense of our national security,” said U.S. Attorney Acosta. “All who threaten the security of our nation should be prepared to pay a hefty price. The U.S. Attorney’s Office in the Southern District of Florida, along with our domestic and international law enforcement partners, is steadfastly committed to safeguarding the integrity of our borders not only from foreign terrorists, but also from those who – for a price – offer to help terrorists to illegally enter our homeland.”

“The smuggling of potential terrorists into the United States is a serious threat. The results of this undercover investigation demonstrate ICE’s commitment to shutting down these vulnerabilities,” said Assistant Secretary Myers. “Those who believe their criminal acts will go unchecked are sorely mistaken. In the U.S. and around the globe, ICE continues to work with the law enforcement community to infiltrate and close down these operations.”

The arrests and charges arise from an international investigation led by the ICE Attaché’s Office in Bogotá, Colombia, with the support of and in coordination with the Colombian and Panamanian police and prosecutorial authorities. The ICE offices in Washington, D.C. and Miami also assisted in the investigation, along with the ICE Attaché’s Office in Panama City, Panama.

The case is being prosecuted by Trial Attorney Brian Skaret of the Domestic Security Section of the Criminal Division at the U.S. Department of Justice, and Assistant U.S. Attorney William White of the U.S. Attorney’s Office in the Southern District of Florida, Miami Division.

An indictment is merely a formal accusation. It is not proof of guilt, and a defendant is presumed innocent until and unless proven guilty.

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